

Sexual Abuse: Recognizing & Reporting

I. How to tell if a student has been sexually abused or exploited:

- The student tells you (possibly following a lesson on exploitation).
- The student acts differently from usual, in troubled ways . . .
 - Regressing to more babyish behavior
 - Clinging to you or another staff person
 - Cranky, hostile or depressed
 - Sleeping in class, or lacking energy
 - Development of minor ailments (headaches, stomach aches, no appetite)
 - Reluctant to leave school at end of day
 - Dressing provocatively or wearing many layers of clothing even during hot weather

These behaviors can signal other stresses, but it never hurts to ask if you can help with “a problem.”

- One student confides that another student was exploited.

II. What to do if a student does confides in you that s/he has been sexually exploited or if you have “reasonable cause to believe” that sexual abuse or exploitation has occurred:

- Believe that student and say, “I believe you.”
- Tell the student that s/he is **not** to blame and say, “I care about you and I am glad you told me.”
- Speak privately with the student and maintain the student’s confidentiality within the school, except if you feel the need to enlist the help of one other adult support person (your principal, school nurse, or whomever you trust the most).
- **REPORT THE ABUSE.** State law **requires** professional school personnel to report the suspected abuse to either the police or to Children’s Protective Services.¹ **It is not sufficient to “turn the case over” to your principal or anyone else.** You are required by law to report it yourself or make certain it has been reported by another person (by being in the room at the time). And you do not need to know for certain that abuse has occurred to be obligated to report. All you need is *reasonable cause to believe* it has occurred; it is the job of CPS to investigate, not yours.
- If you need/want support for yourself or the child in reporting the abuse, seek professional help.²

III. What to do if you get an anonymous question from a student that indicates possible abuse or exploitation:

¹ In King County, WA, report concerns to Child Protective Services (1-800-609-8764 during business hours, 1-800-562-5624 during nights and weekends). Report abuse of adults 18+ (who are developmentally disabled) to Aging and Adult Intake Services (206-341-7660).

² In King County, WA, for support and advice, call King County Sexual Assault Center (1-888-99-VOICE), Children’s Response Center (425-688-5130) or Harborview Center for Sexual Assault & Traumatic Stress (206-521-1800). National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1 – 800 – 656 - HOPE

- **If you recognize the handwriting**, ask that student if you can talk with them privately. Do not pressure them, but tell them that you care and if there is anything they want help with, you can help. If the student denies writing the question, tell them that you care and want to help if they ever do need help in the future. Explain that, in the meantime, you do have to notify Child Protective Services that you received the question, even if you aren't sure who wrote it.
- **If you don't recognize the handwriting**, call Child Protective Services for advice about whether to make a formal report.